
Sax Tips eZine - A Minimalist approach to improvisation

Often times when we are improvising in jazz or any other idiom for that matter, we come to a point where we are in search for new ideas. There has never been a shortage of scales and patterns to try and utilize.

Improvisation can also be looked upon as spontaneous composition. So what about using one of the essentials for composition? The Motif.

A Motif is a germ, or small musical particle that sets the mood and direction of a composition. We find similar qualities in all music genres. The best examples in jazz music are blues tunes. One can follow the same logic in many swing and Big Band tunes and arrangements from the swing era up through the Hard Bop era.



This has of course, been a great tool for improvisation, even in the most modern and "avant garde" idioms.

Let's try this with a blues. Create a four-note motif, preferable chord tones, with a specific rhythm. With every change chord either transpose, or modify the motif to fit with the chord. Continue this pattern throughout the form. In places where you have two bars of the same chord (i.e. bars 3 & 4), extend the motif to "spill over" into the second bar. If you transposed the motif in bar 2, transpose it also in bars 5 & 6, or use a transposed version of the motif as you did in bars 3 & 4. In bars 7 & 8, use the same version of the motif as you did in bars 3 & 4. In bars 9 & 10, you may either create a new motif or modify the original motif to fit the chords. Then in bars 11 & 12, repeat what have done in bars 3 & 4 and 7 & 8.

Using this pattern as a template or "cookie cutter", you can create several blues tunes. Whatever you didn't do in your first tune (i.e. if you transposed, now modify), do this now with same motif for your new tune. From the same motif, you've now composed two blues tunes.

You can also use this technique in regards to intervals. Say for instance, you decided to use a perfect fifth interval as your motif. The tune "High Fly" from Randy Weston is a perfect example. Play, compose or improvise through the entire form of the blues using only a perfect fifth as your motif. Transpose it, modify it, do whatever you have to do keep the interval. I've also used this technique during a jazz workshop with the tune "Lady Bird". Although, there were some advanced players present, it still was not easy at first to think in this way, and try to improvise. It is a challenge and will in any case give you new ideas for your solos.

Analyze a few of few of your favorite tunes for motifs, intervals and sequences. Learn to play them in all keys. Try "quoting" from one tune over the changes of another tune.

Have fun,

Evan Tate